



Atlanta VA Medical Center's Dr. Norberto Fas attends to a veteran during a previous Stand Down. Photo courtesy of Atlanta VA Medical Center

VA to provide much-needed assistance to homeless veterans at annual Stand Down

by Nigel Roberts

Veteran service organizations will gather in Decatur on Oct. 3 to offer a range of services, such as health care, legal services and housing referrals, to homeless veterans in the area. The Atlanta VA Medical Center is hosting the Stand Down for Homeless Veterans event at the medical center, located at 1670 Clairmont Road. The one-day event starts at 8 a.m. and ends at 4:30 p.m.

In the military, a stand down is a brief timeout from combat, often used as an opportunity to allow weary soldiers to recover and refresh before going back into battle. In the same spirit, the upcoming Stand Down event is a grassroots, community-based intervention program designed to help local homeless veterans to recover and refresh so that they can combat their homelessness.

Stand Down is an outreach effort that brings homeless veterans together in a single location so that the VA and community organizations can provide a wealth of services that address the individual needs

of homeless veterans as they rebuild their lives.

With worsening economic conditions, the VA expects more than 800 homeless veterans to attend this year's Stand Down. But with an army of more than 300 volunteers, numerous veteran organizations and community services on hand, **Mary Lou Pittman**, chief of Atlanta VA voluntary services, is confident that the volunteers will meet the basic needs of each former service member who attends.

"The homeless vets often arrive tired and worn down. They take a shower, get a meal and get medical attention," said Pittman. But it doesn't end there. "We also follow up with them. Some will leave with housing referrals and appointments for further care," she continued.

Many DeKalb-based and national support group organizations and government agencies, including Decatur Work Force Development, the Salvation Army and the Social Security Administration, will attend.

The scope of homelessness

among veterans is daunting.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there officially are approximately 154,000 homeless veterans. But the agency admits that the actual figure is probably closer to twice that number. In the metro area, the Atlanta VA estimates that there are more than 2,000 veterans who live on the streets or in shelters—figures for DeKalb County are not available.

Resources to help these vets are available, but reaching the former service men and women presents a major challenge. About 45 percent of homeless veterans have a mental illness, and more than 70 percent of them have alcohol or other drug addictions, according to VA statistics. Despite deploying groups of social workers into the DeKalb community, those challenges make outreach much more difficult.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that from 1994 to 2000, Stand Down events have reached more than 200,000 homeless vets.